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## WHY WAS ACTS WRITTEN?

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If one should undertake to write the story of the early years of the Christian church without making use of the Book of Acts, he would speedily realize with new and vivid force, its central importance as a source for early church history. No other writing even pretends to cover the same field. Because of its character and importance it must ever remain one of our most precious and interesting literary possessions.

It may not at once be assumed that since it constitutes the sole narrative document from the Apostolic age of the church it gives a complete account of the development of the church in the period it describes. On the contrary, its story is very incomplete. It is obvious to any but the most casual reader of Acts that there are great gaps in its record. The writer moves with rapid strides along the way which the church had taken before him. Some parts and phases of the history, it is true, are narrated with considerable fulness.<sup>1</sup> Yet generally speaking it is but a sketch. Careful reading soon convinces one that this sketchiness is due not so much to scarcity of material as to selection from the material at hand. The author of Acts in writing his history did not exhaust his available sources.<sup>2</sup> He used only so much of his material as was to the purpose in hand. What was that purpose? This question it is our task to answer.

We may best begin our study by getting clearly before us the scope

<sup>1</sup> This is especially true of Paul's experiences during his last journey to Jerusalem and his arrest and imprisonment, chaps. 20-27.

<sup>2</sup> This suggests to us the problem of the sources which underlie our present Book of Acts. That the author made use of written sources is suggested both by the internal evidence of the book itself and by the preface of the companion writing, the Gospel of Luke. His sources were not all of equal value. Even Ramsay, *St. Paul, the Traveller and Roman Citizen*, p. 367, who rates the writer as such a great historian, holds that in the early chapters especially some material passed muster which was of inferior quality. But this perplexing question is not a part of our present task.

of the material of which the author actually made use. What is the history that he has recorded?

By its opening sentence the book purports to be a continuation of a "first treatise" which is easily identified as our Gospel of Luke. It refers to this former treatise as a record of that "which Jesus began to do and teach until the day that he was received up," i. e., the day of his ascension (Acts 1:2; cf. Luke 24:51). This sentence implies another to balance its thought, but the writer never penned it. It should have indicated the scope and purpose of the second treatise. It is implied, however, that the Book of Acts is to continue the story of the former treatise and is to be a record of the activity of Jesus after his receiving up, or ascension. It is further suggested that he is to be represented in this work by "the apostles whom he had chosen" and to whom he had spoken "of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" and "had given commandment." According to Acts 10:36 and 13:24 the work of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles is a continuity. The history recorded in Luke and Acts is a unit. The apostles are to abide at Jerusalem and await the coming of the Spirit whom Jesus is to send (Acts 1:4, 8; 2:33; cf. Luke 24:48, 49) to qualify them for their work. They are further told that the scope of their activity is to be from Jerusalem throughout all Judea<sup>3</sup> and Samaria unto the "uttermost part of the earth."<sup>4</sup> The evidence seems ample that the writer intends to say that the task of the Apostles was to carry the gospel from Jerusalem throughout Palestine and gentile territory to Rome. At any rate the story of just such expansion is that which Acts records. It falls most naturally into parts which

<sup>3</sup> In Acts 9:31 Judea is used in the narrow sense of the single province. It usually signifies in Luke and Acts the whole territory of Palestine except Samaria. See Luke 1:5; 4:44; 7:17; 23:5; Acts 10:37, 39; 11:1. It has the wider significance here. Note "all Judea." Josephus (*Ant.* I, 7:2), writing in the period of the composition of Acts, expressly states that the land anciently called Canaan was then known as Judea.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase may mean only a far distant land (cf. Luke 11:31). But the Psalms of the Pharisees (*circa* 50 B. C.) speak (8:16) of Pompey who captured Palestine for the Romans as having come from the "utmost part of the earth." The expression is precisely the one used here. This suggests Rome as here in the mind of the writer. The suggestion is further corroborated by the fact that Acts closes so abruptly when the gospel has been carried to Rome. Compare also the expression "limit of the west," probably referring to Rome, in the first Epistle of Clement (*circa*. 95 A. D.) 5:7.

correspond approximately to such an outline.<sup>5</sup> The first seven chapters deal with the life and development of the church in Jerusalem. Near the close of this period the preaching of Stephen prepares for a period of church expansion. This is carried out through the work of various individuals. Philip becomes the evangelist to the alien Samaritans<sup>6</sup> and also preaches the gospel to the eunuch, an alien and a proselyte. Peter under the direction of a heavenly vision carries the gospel to Caesarea, the gentile 'capital' of Palestine. By the disciples who were scattered abroad from Jerusalem because of persecution, the gospel was carried to Antioch (11:19-21), the third city of the Roman Empire in importance<sup>8</sup> and the center of gentile life<sup>9</sup> nearest Palestine. Under the preaching of Barnabas and Paul, whose preparation for the task has already been detailed in chap. 9, the work is thoroughly established in Antioch and this city becomes the new center of the church in gentile territory. This account extends through chap. 12. Paul and Barnabas then carry the work over into Asia Minor. They here establish a number of churches—in

<sup>5</sup> Julicher, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 436, divides the book into two parts: (1) "The Primitive Community and Palestinian Mission with Peter as Leader," chaps. 1-13; (2) "The Gentile Extension of the Gospel from Antioch to the Ends of the Earth, with Paul as Leader," chaps. 14-28; McGiffert, *The Apostolic Age*, pp. 345 f., makes four divisions: (1) "The Early Church in Jerusalem," chaps. 1-7; (2) "Expansion through Philip, Peter, Barnabas, and Paul," chaps. 8-14; (3) "Missionary Career of Paul," chaps. 15:1-21:6; (4) "Paul's Arrest and Imprisonment, 21:27 to end of Acts.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. John 4:9; 8:48; Matt. 9:56; Luke 9:51, 56. See also Sirach 50:25, 26: "With two nations is my soul vexed and the third is no nation; they that sit upon the mountain of Samaria, the Philistines, and that foolish people that dwelleth in Sichem."

<sup>7</sup> Acts 23:23, 24; 24:1; 25:15. See also Peter's defense of his action in Acts, chap. 11, and especially the statement 11:18: "Then to the gentiles also God hath granted repentance unto life." Josephus, *War*, iii, 9:1, says Caesarea was "for the greatest part inhabited by Greeks."

<sup>8</sup> Josephus, *War*, iii, 2:4.

<sup>9</sup> The question as to those to whom the gospel was first preached in Antioch is perplexing. The preponderance of textual evidence is heavily in favor of reading "Grecian Jews." The context requires the reading "Greeks." Westcott and Hort read the former but regard it as a "primitive error." Chase, *The Credibility of Acts*, pp. 81 ff., states that to read "Greeks" would make the author contradict his own statement in vs. 19. His statement is incorrect. Those of vs. 19 and vs. 20 are expressly distinguished from each other by the form of sentence. Chase would reconstruct the text by inserting after ἐλάλουν in vs. 20 the words καὶ συνεζήτουν, and read "spoke and reasoned with the Greeks." He compares with this Acts 9:29 and 18:25.

gentile territory. Their progress is then delayed until they secure from the leaders of the church in Jerusalem recognition of the validity and divine approval of the gentile mission, and arrangements for the further unrestricted extension of the work. This carries us through chap. 15:35. From this point on to the close of the book we have the story of the extension of the church in gentile lands, accomplished despite the prejudice and opposition of both Jews and gentiles. Under the persecution of the Jews Paul, the greatest leader of the gentile mission, is arrested and brought before the Roman authorities. Notwithstanding their bitterness and clamor for his life he is transferred to Caesarea for safekeeping. Here he appeals to Caesar. Because of this he is taken as a prisoner to Rome to appear before the emperor. Having reached Rome he calls his countrymen together and to them preaches the gospel. They will not receive it. He turns his attention to the gentiles, to whom, it is implied, he preaches about two years. The gospel has been carried from Jerusalem, the metropolis of the Jews, to Rome, the metropolis of the nations. What object had the author in mind in the narration of this development?

There are those who consider the chief interest to be biographical.<sup>10</sup> It is obvious enough that the work of carrying the gospel as recorded has been quite largely that of two men, Peter and Paul. But there is hardly sufficient evidence to say that they were the chief interest of the writer. The way in which the narrative overlaps in chaps. 9-12 is not consistent with this conception. Even if we allow that our canons of historical and biographical writing are not to be too rigidly imposed upon the writer of Acts, he can hardly have failed to have kept more distinct the lives and activities of his two chief characters. Nor can we believe that both of them would have been dropped so abruptly if the author was mainly concerned with an account of their lives. We must believe that an interest more fundamental than this was in his mind. Their work dovetailed in the promotion of this larger interest. When they ceased to be of significance in promoting it there was no reason why they should any longer be kept in view.

<sup>10</sup> Ramsay, *St. Paul*, etc., pp. 20 ff., thinks that one of the chief aims was to glorify Paul: "His general aim is to describe the development of the church; but his affection and interest turn to Paul, and after a time his narrative groups itself around Paul."

Ramsay has in various writings laid great emphasis upon the fact that the writer of Acts is "a historian of the first rank." He suggests that his historical sympathy has led him to record the facts because he thought they were in themselves worthy of attention and conveyed a great lesson. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. xxxvii, believes the leading motive of Acts was historical, i. e., it was the desire to preserve the remembrance of great deeds. Such a collection was not needed, he thinks, in the early years of the church but was a need of later years when most of the eye witnesses of the events had passed away.<sup>11</sup> But if the main purpose in writing was merely to preserve and recount the great deeds of the past the writer would scarcely have made such an incomplete record. Instead of a full account in which events are recorded for their own sake and left to speak their own message, choice is made of such events and details as will best contribute to the result of showing a particular trend of events.

What is the trend of events which it is desired to show? It may be partly true that "the plan of the book has been obscured by reason of proper climax and conclusion being wanting." Certainly it is beyond question that Acts gives one the impression of being left in the air. It is almost as if one were interrupted in the middle of a sentence. It was commonly said by older writers that the book was written at a time when there was nothing more to record. Such writers dated it at the end of Paul's two-years' stay in Rome. But nowadays scholars are not wont to date it so early. The old explanation does not avail. More recent attempts to explain this abrupt ending are various.<sup>12</sup> The sufficient reason is a simple one. That which is actually shown is how Christianity expanded from a sect

<sup>11</sup> But see the preface to Luke's Gospel for the suggestion that it was written while many eye witnesses were still living.

<sup>12</sup> Ramsay, *St. Paul*, etc., p. 351, says, "No one can accept the ending of Acts as the conclusion of a rationally conceived history. Such an ending might exist in a diary but not in a history." He thinks not only for this reason, but also because of the use of *πρῶτον* "first" instead of *πρότερον* in Acts 1:1 (*op. cit.*, p. 27) that the writer contemplated a third treatise which would connect with this and would carry the narrative to a finished conclusion. For a strong criticism of this view see McGiffert, *Apostolic Age*, p. 418, note. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. xxxviii, explains the abrupt ending by saying, "The Acts is a history of the new dispensation [of the Spirit]; and that is why it lacks definite conclusion. These twenty-eight chapters are but *the beginning*: we are still living under the dispensation of the Spirit."

within Judaism, with its headquarters at Jerusalem, to a universal religion firmly planted in the imperial city of the empire. When this was shown the writer's work was done, his purpose was accomplished. He had undertaken to show that under the leadership of the Divine Spirit the apostles and evangelists had been used to bear the gospel to the "end of the earth." The expansion which the book professedly set itself to narrate was territorial. But this territorial expansion involved also logical expansion. Not only was it the growth of the church from Jerusalem to Rome but also growth from the narrowest particularism to true universalism. This expansion had not been due to the settled policy of the apostles and teachers, but was the result of a chain of events divinely caused and executed in spite of opposition from every source.

Peter begins his ministry by announcing the promise to Israel and those that were afar off (Acts 2:39; 3:26; 5:31). He and his fellow-workers met opposition from the rulers (4:1-3; 11:27; 5:17, 18) but they continued to obey God in the preaching of the gospel (4:19; 5:29). God was in the movement as Gamaliel indicated (5:38, 39) and therefore the number of disciples steadily grew (2:41, 47; 4:17; 5:11, 14; 6:7). Stephen, a man full of the Holy Spirit (6:5, 10), was accused by the Jews of breaking the bands of Jewish custom and law (6:13, 14) and he declares to them that Jews had always been stubborn and rebellious against the truth (7:51). It was the persecution in connection with Stephen that sent the gospel to Samaria (8:5 ff.) and to the eunuch (8:26 ff., 40). It was because of a specific heavenly message through a vision that Peter preached to Cornelius (10:28, 34 ff.; cf. 11:12, 17, 18) and defended his doing so on such ground. Persecution sent men to Antioch with the gospel (11:19 ff.) where a church was founded. Herod persecuted the church (12:1) but he died in misery and the gospel spread on (12:24).

Paul, while leading in the persecution of the church, is converted (9:3 ff.) and begins to preach Jesus as Christ (9:20-22, 28, 29). From the beginning he is told that he is to be a special messenger to the gentiles (9:15, 16; cf. 22:17-21) as well as to Jews. Paul and Barnabas are sent out by the Holy Spirit into a new mission into gentile territory (13:2, 4). Paul preached Jesus as Christ to Jews, and God-fearing gentiles (13:26, 38; 14:2; 17:3, 7; 18:4, 28).

When he went up to the council at Jerusalem, he and Barnabas related how God had opened a door of faith to the gentiles (14:27; 15:12; cf. 21:19). Peter also reminded the council of his experience in the same way (15:7-11), and James said that a gathering of disciples from the gentiles was according to prophecy (15:13-19). The council then decided that the apostles' work among the gentiles should be encouraged (15:23-29).

By the Holy Spirit Paul was directed to Troas when he would have gone elsewhere (16:6-8) that he might extend the gospel still farther, and in spite of opposition the word spread and prevailed (19:20). It later became the will of the Lord that Paul should go to Rome (19:21; 20:22-24; 23:11; 27:24; cf. 21:10-14), and this he did in spite of all opposition, for God delivered him from "the people, and from the gentiles;" that he might preach to them the gospel (26:16-18; cf. 9:23, 24; 26:23, 24). As Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. I, p. 54, note, says, "The description of the transition from the Jewish to the gentile mission is the main object of the Book of Acts."

It is a record of that which Jesus *continued* to do and teach *after* he was received up, "a history"<sup>13</sup> of the power of God in the apostles." The gospel was offered to the Jews but they rejected it and thereby lost their opportunity. In consequence of their rejection of it it was offered to the gentiles who accepted it.<sup>14</sup>

To whom and in what way was this story of gospel expansion intended to be of significance?

<sup>13</sup> The question of the authenticity of the history need not detain us. We are not to decide either the accuracy of single events nor the question as to their proper consecution. We can agree neither with those who regard the writer as indifferent to the truth of his account so long as it served his purpose, nor with others, Ramsay in particular, who consider him such a supreme historical genius. Jülicher, *Int.*, etc., p. 435, is not far from the truth when he says: "He seems an industrious collector hampered by insufficient material, but desiring to tell his story impartially." Jülicher's discussion, pp. 436-41, seems to me on the whole very sensible. But some of his statements are very arbitrary. He thinks (p. 445) that Stephen's position "is inconceivable only as the hard won result of Paul's lifelong labors." Why might not Stephen have had a vision of the truth as well as Paul? If Stephen must have Paul as spiritual forbear, to whom shall Paul go? Or must God speak to but one?

<sup>14</sup> This sounds like the argument of Paul in Romans 9-11. It may be, as Chase thinks, that to Paul we owe the conception of Acts. Certainly it was written by a firm believer in Pauline Christianity and one also acquainted with the argument by which Paul supported his conception of the gospel.



It is asserted by McGiffert, *The Apostolic Age*, pp. 343 ff., and Ramsay, *St. Paul*, pp. 303-10, that the main purpose was to show that Christianity, wherever it had come into contact with Roman authorities, had been shown to their entire satisfaction to be harmless. Paul, the great hero of the gospel, had been treated with leniency because he was deserving of such treatment. They think it was written in the time of Domitian and was intended as an appeal to the Roman government for leniency in treatment of Christians. With this conception agree also in part Rackham, who calls it "a subordinate motive," and Bartlet, *Biblical World*, Vol. XIX, p. 276, who thinks it "one main occasion." There is some material in Acts that seems to support such a position. When brought before Gallio by the Jews, Paul was about to make his defense, the proconsul interrupted and said to the Jews that if it were a wrong or wicked deed he would hear them; but it was only a question of words and names and he would not be bothered in such matters (Acts 18:14, 15; cf. 19:37-40). So also in effect speak the Roman officials in Acts 23:29; 24:23, 27; 25:18, 25; 26:31, 32. See also 23:19; 25:2 ff.; cf. 23:30; 24:23. But the amount of material not pertinent to this purpose renders it extremely improbable as a sufficient explanation. And even Ramsay considers that the idea involves the release of Paul from the first imprisonment. Certainly if he were not released the argument would lose nearly all its significance. But if the writer had such a purpose in view and knew that Paul was released he most assuredly could not have failed to mention it.

There is quite as much evidence to support the view that the book was addressed to Jewish readers. The last argumentative statement of the book (Acts 28:17-28) asserts that inasmuch as the Jews will not receive the gospel, as was foretold by Isaiah, the prophet, "This salvation of God is sent to the gentiles, and they will receive it." With this also agree such statements as those found in 13:46, 48; 18:6. There is much plausibility in an attempt to place Acts along with the gospel of Matthew. Their common purpose would be to show to the Jews that the gospel was, when rightly conceived, universal in character and that they had lost their opportunity by rejecting it when it was offered them. Certainly there is as good ground for this view as the one just previously mentioned.

But if we allow that either or both of these apologetic motives may be found in Acts, we must still insist that the apologetic purpose is subordinate to the practical. The first words of the book connect it with the gospel of Luke. Whether at the time of the writing of the gospel the second work was already planned must probably remain unanswered.<sup>15</sup> However that may be, the first is in the mind of the writer when he begins the second work and the manner of referring to it seems to connect the second with the first in respect of purpose. It is dedicated to the same person, Theophilus, apparently a man of considerable prominence and probably of high rank.<sup>16</sup> It is intended to establish them in the true faith by giving them to know "the certainty concerning those things wherein" they had been instructed. It reveals the true nature of Christianity by narrating the story of its expansion under the leadership of the Divine Spirit. Despite the prejudice and opposition of apostle, evangelist, Jew and gentile the gospel had been carried from Jerusalem to Rome; it had under divine leadership expanded from a provincial Jewish confession to the universalism of Pauline Christianity. The latter was the true interpretation of the gospel. The history of the church affirmed it. Having thus shown the divine origin of the Pauline conception of the gospel, the author of Acts would establish in this true faith the fellow Christians addressed. Acts was written that fellow Christians might believe that Pauline Christianity was the true conception of the gospel, and that so believing they might continue to abide therein.

<sup>15</sup> Rackham thinks the preface of the gospel belongs both to it and to Acts; so also Chase. Jülicher is of the opposite opinion.

<sup>16</sup> See Acts 23:26; 24:36; 26:25. Cf. Ramsay, *op. cit.*, p. 388. Rackham, p. xxxvii, considers "it is possible that, like John Bunyan, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, Luke is really addressing, not an individual, but the Christian as such, under the guise of 'Theophilus' or 'Lover of God.'"